

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 10CHICAGO TRIBUNE
22 February 1980

Secrecy and the CIA

Every American should be shocked and outraged over the disclosure that the Central Intelligence Agency has been supplying weapons to rebels fighting the Soviet takeover of Afghanistan. Not, however, because the CIA is doing it. We should be outraged because it was made public.

CIA assistance to the rebels is a proper activity, and in the circumstances it seems wise. It was cleared by the proper authorities, including our representatives in Congress, and was carried out with vigor and good sense [the agency took care to give the rebels Soviet small arms and anti-tank weapons rather than American ones].

But secret operations should be kept secret because secrecy can be essential to their success. In the Afghanistan operation the leak lends a degree of credence to Soviet claims that their troops were sent to Afghanistan to counter CIA subversion.

The leak was probably inevitable, given the ludicrous regulations governing covert operations by the agency. Before such an operation can be launched, it must be reported to a half-dozen committees of the Senate and House of Representatives. Literally hundreds of persons, from senators to stenographers,

become privy to the so-called secret. In such circumstances leaks are virtually automatic, and in the Afghanistan case rumors of the CIA operation were circulating in the capital as early as December. Apparently it was decided that assisting the hard-pressed rebels was important enough to go ahead even in the certainty that the world would soon know of it.

This episode should convince Congress that legislation to protect the secrecy of proper covert actions is urgently needed. There are bills now before the House and Senate that would limit knowledge of such operations to single oversight committees of each house. Such limited access would protect the public's right to control the CIA through its elected representatives without making every operation, however laudable, the subject of Georgetown gossip.

Meanwhile aid to the rebels can, and must, go ahead. The guerrillas are fighting tenaciously and they are hurting the Russians badly. They deserve all the help they can get, and it should be a matter of pride that the U. S. is supplying some of it. It would be a matter of greater pride still if somebody in Washington had not blabbed about how it reached them.